

United States v. Umeh, at al.

Operation Relentless

Prepared Remarks for U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara

June 1, 2010

Good afternoon. My name is Preet Bharara, and I am the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

Today we announce the unsealing of charges against members of alleged international narcotics conspiracies – conspiracies that touched four different continents; that measured its traffic not in kilograms, but in tons; and that counted its revenue not by the million, but by the billions of dollars.

This conspiracy, as the unsealed indictments describe, was ultimately put down in no small part because a proud West African nation – working closely with U.S. law enforcement – by its actions stated loudly and clearly: our country is not for sale to drug traffickers.

That nation is the Republic of Liberia; the product is cocaine; its source is South America; and the impact of this event should not be underestimated.

This past weekend, in the culmination of an unprecedented undercover operation involving DEA and the Liberian government, five defendants were arrested on U.S. charges in Monrovia, that nation's capital, and they have been flown to face justice here in the Southern District.

And just a few hours ago, two additional defendants, French and Mawuko, were arrested at the airport in Liberia in connection with these same charges.

The Liberian Government's commitment to the rule of law and to combating international drug traffickers is perhaps most poignantly reflected by the fact that one of the undercovers – who made secret recordings and pretended to accept bribes – is one of that government's highest ranking officials: the Director of the Liberian National Security Agency. More remarkably still, he is also the son of the President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who herself was personally aware of, and cooperated with, the DEA operation.

I am honored to be standing here today with Nathaniel Barnes, the Ambassador from the Republic of Liberia to the United States. Without the strong, unwavering support of the Liberian Government, this investigation would not have been possible.

I am also joined today by our partner in this and so many other landmark investigations: the Drug Enforcement Administration, represented by Thomas Harrigan, Assistant Administrator and Chief of Operations. Less than a year ago, Tom testified before the United States Congress about the troubling and rising tide of trafficking in West Africa. Also, Jim Soiles, the Assistant Special Agent-in-Charge of DEA Special Operations Division.

I also want to express my appreciation to Assistant United States Attorneys Michael Rosensaft, Jenna Dabbs, and Christopher LaVigne, who are in charge of this prosecution and Anjan Sahni, Co-Chief of the Terrorism and International Narcotics Unit.

Now let me take a moment to review the charges. The two indictments unsealed today describe a recent and troubling phenomenon: drug trafficking organizations based in South America (predominately Colombia and Venezuela) have increasingly exploited countries in West Africa as trans-shipment hubs for importing, by air and by sea, hundreds of metric tons of cocaine, worth billions of dollars. These syndicates have preyed like mercenaries upon the nations of West Africa – countries like Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Sierra Leone, Togo, Mali, Ghana, Nigeria, and, until recently, Liberia.

In this case, the defendants were allegedly looking to establish a new base of operations within Liberia on behalf of South American drug trafficking organizations, including organizations which were receiving cocaine from the FARC.

The FARC, of course, is an international terrorist group dedicated to the violent overthrow of the democratically elected government of Colombia. It is also the world's largest supplier of cocaine. To that end, the defendants allegedly attempted to bribe high-level government officials in Liberia – in the form of large sums of cash and cocaine – portions of which cocaine the defendants understood would be imported from West Africa into New York.

What the defendants didn't know, however, was that the Liberian national security officials they were allegedly trying to bribe were actually working undercover as

part of a long-term, coordinated investigation with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. And as a result, the defendants' brazen attempts to corrupt and exploit Liberia in service of their drug business were caught on tape – audio and video.

And these drug plans were not merely aspirational. Certain of the defendants were allegedly tied to Colombian traffickers who had already tried to send 1200 kilograms (well over a ton) of cocaine to West Africa – a shipment which was seized off the coast of Liberia in 2008 – and were actively plotting to help send six tons more to Liberia. As alleged, they were also seeking to enlist the help of Liberian officials to recover the seized ship and its cargo of cocaine.

Over the last two years, this Office, in partnership with the DEA, has recognized the importance to this country of what goes on in West Africa.

- Last year, we announced the first ever transfer of two defendants from Sierra Leone, whom we had charged with narcotics offenses.
- Most recently, this past December, we announced the arrest and transfer from Ghana of three defendants from Mali who, as alleged, represented themselves to be associates of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb on narco-terrorism charges.

The reasons for this Office's commitment to these cases, and the one announced today, are straightforward. The establishment of a narcotics safe haven in West Africa has the potential to unsettle a region, enable terrorism, and facilitate the mass distribution of poison to Europe and America.

The destabilization of West Africa – whether through drug trafficking, narco-terrorism, or corruption – imperils not just the region, but international security.

West Africa is at something of a crossroads. The nations of that region can become beachheads for the narcotics trade, or they can stand as bulwarks against it.

The Republic of Liberia has made a courageous commitment to the latter course. Indeed, President Sirleaf has put her own flesh and blood in the fight and in the line of fire. What greater resolve could a leader demonstrate? We owe her, her country, and her region everything we can muster to assist in that fight.

Finally, we owe it to the American people because it is America that suffers and sees its people poisoned by the scourge of the international drug trade.